

The World at a Crossroads

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Edited by Cheryl Taylor

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I

Black clouds, pregnant with fury, gathered over the city, preparing to wage war. Flicks of lightning transformed the evening sky, momentarily illuminating the town and casting strange shadows on the deserted streets. Then cracks of thunder echoed like cannon fire. Against this backdrop, a middle-aged man lumbered out of bed towards the front door of his apartment. His hand hovered over the handle. As if in a dream, he heard a voice, gentle and melodic, beseeching him to walk to the ocean, now a swirling vortex. Turning the handle, he left the apartment. As he walked the street, bathed in the orange glow of streetlights, the rain lashed his face. ‘Come to me, Amadeo,’ said the angelic voice, ‘I’ve travelled from afar to be with you.’ Amadeo smiled. ‘You belong to me, and I belong to you.’ He shielded his eyes as the rain became more intense. ‘Come to me, Amadeo.’

The esplanade, bustling with people an hour earlier, was now deserted. Even the fruit bats had fled from the trees that lined the path. Only surrender to the otherworldly voice had meaning. Its timbre drowned out rational thought. Ahead was a wharf festooned with blue lights. Beside it, slabs of stone, makeshift stairs, descended to the beach. Amadeo staggered down the stony steps, edging towards the boisterous black sea, which now and then reflected silvery flashes of lightning. Looking sideways, he saw three white orbs of light. They hovered

above the island, then glided across the bay towards him. Amadeo's legs buckled, and he dropped to the sandy shore.

'Fear not, Amadeo,' said the voice. 'The lights are a part of me and my family.' The orbs circled and formed a triangle. 'We are the spirits of revolution, revelation, and rejuvenation.'

'Are you a god?' His voice trembled with wonder and fear.

'In your world, we'd be considered divine.' Amadeo knelt, folding his hands as if in prayer. 'No need for that, Amadeo. Of all humans, you are the chosen one.'

'But I'm a nobody,' gasped Amadeo.

'You've never suspected?' Amadeo's brow furrowed. 'You're not of this world—Don't you remember?' Amadeo's eyes widened. 'When you were a toddler, we visited you....'

'Wasn't that a dream?'

'At first you were afraid.... Curious, you opened the back door of your grandparents' house.... Your tiny legs carried you past the plum and apricot trees to the open field where we were waiting for you.'

The veil lifted slowly, revealing Amadeo's experiences from more than fifty years ago. White plasma beams coiled around him like a lasso. They drew him off the ground towards the three lights, which merged into one. Baby Amadeo passed through a metallic membrane into a commodious chamber filled with beings dissimilar to him. From his perspective they seemed ethereal, fairies with blue skin, translucent wings, and white hair. But when he gazed into their dark, almond-shaped eyes, a spiral of white lines formed and rotated rapidly. Mesmerised, the toddler lay down on a cold white slab. As this lifted from the ground, the blue-skinned creatures placed a silver cap on his head, and Amadeo felt his consciousness merge with theirs. He had become them, and they had

become him: he was no longer human but divine, and imbued with preternatural powers.

With the past at last unveiled, Amadeo rose from the sand. Insights that had eluded him for countless decades illuminated his mind.

‘At last, you understand, Amadeo,’ said the incorporeal voice while the tempest whirled around them. ‘We’ve come to take you away from this world—’

‘Before humanity destroys itself?’

‘Even if we wanted to.... We cannot interfere.’

‘Will the world end?’

‘Yes. However, sometimes our predictions are wrong.... Because our reality is trans-dimensional, the past, present and future can change.... Something seemingly inconsequential, like a schoolchild missing a bus, can change his life trajectory and the world that he inhabits.’

‘How do I stop humanity’s destruction?’ urgently asked Amadeo.

‘It’s too late... the die has already been cast.’

‘I don’t believe you... there must be a way?’

‘See for yourself!’

As the luminous orbs spun around Amadeo, accelerating time, as sunrises appeared and instantly faded into sunsets, he remained unchanged, protected within the chronological capsule. ‘As time has passed, the world has changed...’ Then the lights slowed, emitting a pulse that caused him to sink into unconsciousness. Before darting skyward, the angelic voice said, ‘Speak, Amadeo, and we’ll return, we will rescue you from the calamity to come.’

Amadeo lay with contorted limbs on the sandy shore. The crescent moon and the stars shimmered on the smooth sea. Ahead the sounds of children playing

fetch with their dogs grew louder. Detecting the unconscious Amadeo, the dogs barked excitedly, sniffing around him with damp noses before dashing back to the children, who were now close enough to see him. Believing that he was pretending to sleep, they picked up a branch and poked him, but when he did not respond, they rushed back to their parents. Screaming and sobbing, they proclaimed: ‘There’s a dead man on the beach.’

One parent called an ambulance while the others rushed to Amadeo, shining flashlights in his eyes, praying for him to wake up. Time dragged on, but the comatose man did not respond. Far off, the ambulance’s red and green lights pulsed brightly. Its siren wailed as it sped down the esplanade. A moment later, a muscular man left the vehicle with a red bag in hand. He sprinted along the beach, following the parents’ flashlights.

‘Wake up, mister,’ said the paramedic. His flashlight illuminated Amadeo’s closed eyes with red: ‘Wake up!’ Amadeo jerked, and the muscular medic pulled him from the sand: ‘Upsy-daisy now.’

‘Where am I?’ asked Amadeo. His legs quivered like jelly as the man assisted him along the beach.

‘We thought you were a goner,’ he said with a smile, signalling his coworker to open the ambulance door as he guided Amadeo to the vehicle parked at the esplanade’s curb.

‘What’s today’s date?’

‘You’d better come to the hospital....’ He nuzzled the patient into the seat. ‘But before then I’ll do your Obs.’ He pricked Amadeo’s finger. ‘Blood sugar levels are normal.’ He put a BP monitor on Amadeo’s other finger: ‘Perfect blood pressure.’ After he inputted the data, his eyes widened as he read the patient’s medical history. A sarcastic sigh escaped his lips as he furiously pounded the keyboard, producing a loud clicking noise, and then he asked in a long drawl, ‘Have you taken any drugs?’ The patient shook his head. A flame of disbelief ignited in the paramedic’s eyes.

‘You don’t believe me!’

‘Whether I believe you or not, you’ve had your struggles, Amadeo. Besides, we got reports of someone who matched your description acting strangely.’ The medic’s words brought tears to Amadeo’s eyes.

Rehabilitated or not, Amadeo’s history of paranoid schizophrenia and meth addiction would permanently stigmatise him, overshadowing anything he might say. He stayed silent from fear of being hospitalised, yet inwardly he was a banshee, screaming at the top of his lungs.

‘It doesn’t matter what I say,’ Amadeo murmured. ‘They’ll lock me up anyway.’

To calm himself, Amadeo dug his fingers into his palms as the ambulance sped along the orange-lit streets. He knew the drill: the emergency department would make him wait perhaps two hours, but if he were unlucky, he would wait for seven hours in the rooms assigned to mental patients. Here they would wait for him to play up so that they could legally send him to the psych ward. Medics may have changed over the years, but their *modus operandi* (delay and disorientate) had not. As the ambulance parked at the ER door, this seemed almost comical to Amadeo, if it were not tragic. Once again, the voice of reason told him not to resist, no matter what they said or did.

II

Life in the secure unit moved sluggishly. Each day was a monotonous routine of meals and medication, punctuated by an occasional outburst from a patient. Life seemed drained away, from the place as it did from the patients, as they wandered like zombies around the enclosed perimeter, in a stupor from self-medicated cigarettes. This was not an environment for healing a sick soul. With

locked doors, a high, barbed-wire fence, and security cameras, it resembled a jail more than a place of care.

Outside, however, the world was enduring violent upheavals. Filtered through the muted televisions, news of bombings, political unrest, and economic collapse created a stark contrast to the eerie calm of the ward. Amadeo collapsed to the floor, overwhelmed by the world's sorrow. His hands shielded his ears from the phantom pleas of billions of people. 'Why should I worry about what happens to humanity?' he thought. 'The elite never cared about the impoverished masses. All that mattered to them was worshipping Mammon¹.'

Amadeo had experienced enough of the world to realise that the elite would never be punished for their greed. He crawled to his bedroom at the end of the corridor. The moment his head touched the pillow, a vivid vision of the future flashed into his mind.

The panicked voices of Wall Street traders reverberated throughout the world. Eyes glistened with tears. Stocks plunged, wiping out trillions of dollars. What began in New York spread like a virus to every stock exchange. Within a year, the *Second Great Depression* resulted in long queues of people whose grimy faces were devoid of joy, for their only aim was to quench the fires of hunger. The wildfire of class warfare spread as the masses gathered outside the palaces of the elites with pitchforks in hand. In disbelief, the privileged watched the crowd climbing over their high fences, though their security fired round after round, killing dozens. The impoverished multitude broke through, and the

¹ The embodiment of wealth as a malevolent spirit or deity.

security like rats deserted the marble mansions, leaving them to founder on a sea of societal scorn.

Centuries of inequality were repaid. Out of fear, the elites tried to placate the mob. 'If it's money you want...' They pulled wads of greenbacks from their pockets. 'Here, take it!' The sunken eyes of the destitute widened at the sight of more money than they had ever seen, even though hyperinflation had diminished its value.

'Apart from wiping one's arse. It's worthless,' the people cried, as they tossed banknotes onto the marble floor. Overcome by rage, the mob unleashed a violent attack on their capitalist tormentors. Blood spattered the Lichtenstein² in a fan-like pattern.

Society had collapsed into anarchy, with one set of oppressors replaced by another. Amidst the chaos, a false messiah, Bryan Trommer, emerged, vowing to restore law and order. From the lectern, the towering, fair-haired man (whose parentage included an investment banker and a foreign-born wife) told his adoring minions, 'Let us fulfil my late father's wish and...' He paused for dramatic effect, eliciting thunderous applause from his audience who were clamouring for blood. 'Purge this country's undesirables.' His enthusiastic supporters did not realise that Bryan viewed them with disdain--lambs who would be slaughtered once they had voted for him.

After winning the election, Bryan dismantled the government and legal system, making it ineffectual against his rule. Unopposed, he commanded the military to round up the impoverished and defenceless, sending them like cattle to extermination factories. *Imagine, if you will, the sickening smell and stream of blood from bodies suspended by their feet from metal hooks.* The nation dreaded the new American emperor who befriended like-minded despots. The unholy alliance prepared to divide the planet, sacrificing peace to further enrich

² The text refers to artwork by Roy Fox Lichtenstein (1923-1997), an American pop artist whose paintings fetch exorbitant prices.

themselves and their industrialist allies. Tick-tock, tick-tock, went the clock, then detonated into war. From the astral realm Amadeo could only watch. Then a searing, white light blinded him, and a gruff voice said, ‘Wake up, Amadeo!’

A male nurse, who could have been a footballer from his stocky frame, shone a torch through the peephole, causing Amadeo to jerk forward in bed. The keys jangled in the lock before a dull clang signalled the door’s unbolting; the nurse followed with a paper cup in his hand.

‘Here’s your medication,’ he said, thrusting the cup towards the patient, whose trembling hand took it out of obedience and apprehension. Amadeo swallowed his pills with a large gulp of water and then drifted back to sleep. In the sanctuary of slumber, he transcended the confines of the ward.

As Amadeo slept, the early morning sun sliced through the Venetian blinds, painting the room in stripes of shadow and gold. No matter what was happening in the world, or even within the ward, it seemed that no one could disturb Amadeo’s sanctum. His room, with its bed and ensuite bathroom, featuring a sloping shower door, felt like a cave. Here the middle-aged man could hibernate while the war raged outside. Nevertheless, the sound of the door being unbolted jolted him forward. A moment later, a crew-cut female nurse dryly said, ‘Breakfast is served.’

Amadeo staggered to the dining room, grabbed a plate of scrambled eggs and a small carton of orange juice, and took his place at the window-facing table. As he shovelled the gelatinous yellow eggs into his mouth, he noticed that the other patients, who had finished breakfast, were gathering in the enclosed courtyard for their morning cigarettes. From sunrise to sunset, they puffed on their tobacco-filled cancer sticks to alleviate the boredom or anguish of their confinement. Amadeo hardly noticed them, because what was happening on the

muted TV drew him like iron to a magnet. After eating, he saw that the TV was displaying the impacts of yesterday's downing of an American Airlines flight over the China Seas and of a terrorist attack in Washington. The result was a dramatic drop in the *New York Stock Exchange*.

Amadeo's eyes darted from the screen to the window, where he saw the patients with the cigarettes in hand, frozen as if they had gazed on Medusa. The crew-cut nurse coming toward him was also frozen. From nowhere, a disembodied voice grew louder, prompting him to shift his gaze. Instead of a person, three pulsating globes floated down the passage. They lingered in front of the television,

'Don't be foolish, Amadeo,' they said. 'Come with us before it's too late.'

Fear spread throughout his body, and he dropped to the floor.

'Haven't you suffered enough?'

'Nurse! Nurse!'

'Don't bother with humanity. They're doomed, Amadeo....'

The orbs vanished like ghosts through the ceiling. Reanimated, the nurse dashed towards him: 'What's the matter?' He pointed his trembling hand towards the ceiling. 'There's nothing there, Amadeo. You'd better return to your room.' She signalled a coworker, and Amadeo curled into a foetal position. Together, they attempted to lift him from the floor, but he was as immobile and lifeless as a doll. 'If you won't cooperate...' the first nurse said, pointing to a wheelchair, 'We'll wheel you to your room.' She gently shook him. 'Do you hear me, Amadeo?' Meanwhile, the second nurse, a stocky male, pushed the "winged chariot" into position. 'Grab his legs, Peter!' After a herculean heave, they manoeuvred him to his room and locked him in.

Hours went by before they checked on him. During that time, Amadeo crawled to the en suite. His eyes were fixed on the sloping shower door. *Perhaps in death, I shall be free of my madness?* He tied two towels together, ensuring one end had a knot, and threaded them through the door's gap. With a steady

hand, he coiled the towels around his neck. His legs gave way, and he hung a metre from the floor. Panic set in. With widened eyes he clawed at his throat, desperate for air. Each gasp felt like fire, burning through his lungs, leaving him more breathless than before. His vision faded to black. His regular heart throbbed irregularly. But before the Grim Reaper's scythe severed the cord that bound him to the mortal realm, the towels came apart. Amadeo crashed to the floor.

‘Haven't you suffered enough,’ said a voice that materialised into a glowing globe before him. ‘Come, Amadeo, before it's too late.’

The noise of advancing footsteps grew louder, each step was an explosion of sound and fury. The incorporeal voice grew urgent: ‘There's nothing you and I can do to save the world and its people. Come now, give me your hand.’ With nothing to lose, Amadeo reached out. ‘That's it.’

As the door burst open, Amadeo disappeared in a surge of light. The bewildered nurses shielded their eyes. When the light faded, they were alone in the room, but a whisper lingered: ‘The world is at a crossroads. Heed our warning, humanity. Beware of the fair-haired man who'll lead the world to war for the benefit of a privileged few. Do not vote for him.’

The End